

Review article

The Lowering of the Voting Age in Denmark: The Referendum of September 1978

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1. The Background

One of the most conspicuous trends in western democracies during the last century has been the extension of the suffrage. After the introduction of universal suffrage a further democratization has taken place through a progressive lowering of the voting age. This general trend has also been noticeable in the Scandinavian countries. It could be said, however, that Denmark has lagged somewhat behind the other Scandinavian and European countries in the process of lowering the voting age.¹

In Denmark universal suffrage for elections to the Folketing (the lower popularly elected house) was introduced by the Constitution of 1915, with a voting age of 25 years.² Thereafter the voting age was unchanged until 1953. In that year a new Constitution was adopted by a referendum.

At the same time the voters were given a choice between a lowering of the voting age to either 23 years or 21 years. Although the age of reaching majority was 21 years, a plurality of votes was cast in favour of 23 years for earliest voting age.

Up to 1953 the voting age in Denmark was laid down directly in the Constitution. However, the Constitution of 1953 states that the age qualification for suffrage may be altered at any time by statute. A bill passed by the Folketing for this purpose shall receive the royal assent only when the provision for a new voting age has been put to a referendum. In the referendum, votes shall be cast for or against the bill. For the bill to be rejected, a majority of those voting in the referendum – but not less than 30 per cent of all those entitled to vote – must vote against the bill.

In 1961 a referendum passed a bill which lowered the voting age from 23 years to 21 years. The turnout was rather low at 37.3 per cent, but only 16.6 per cent of the eligible voters cast their vote against the bill.

A few years later, the Socialist Peoples Party, in 1964, proposed lowering the voting age to 18 years. This initiative had no immediate result. The age suffrage qualification was discussed again in 1968–69. With a view to preserve Scandinavian uniformity, the bourgeois coalition government proposed the voting age should be lowered to 20 years; there emerged in the Folketing a majority for this change in the voting age. In the following referendum, however, a large majority rejected the bill: the turnout was 63.6 per cent and 49.8 per cent of the eligible voters voted for rejection.³

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In 1971 the bourgeois government once again proposed a voting age of 20 years. This time the Folketing passed the proposal and the referendum took place together with the Folketing election in September 1971. With a high turnout at 86.2 per cent, the bill was passed, because more votes were cast in favour of the bill than against it.

In 1976 the voting age was discussed again in the Danish Folketing. The Social Democratic minority government proposed to lower the age of majority to 18 years. Even if the government wanted to separate the issues of *majority age* and *voting age*, these issues were linked together by several party spokesmen. Following the passing of a bill for a majority age of 18 years, the Radical Liberals in October 1976 put forward a bill that proposed to lower the voting age to 18 years.

The bill was reintroduced after the Folketing election in February 1977 and again in the new session in November 1977. In this way the bill received no less than three first readings in plenum and it was again and again referred to consideration in committee. After a quick second and third reading it was finally passed by a large majority, when 131 members voted for lowering the voting age to 18 years and only 21 members voted against. The opponents were found mainly among the Liberals and the Conservative People's Party, with a few members of the Progress Party and the Christian People's Party. Prime Minister Anker Jørgensen announced shortly afterwards that a referendum on the issue would take place on 19 September.

2. *The Campaign*

The public debate on the voting age issue was rather special in at least two respects. Firstly, only the supporters of lowering the voting age to 18 years were organised. Secondly, the campaign was by and large an effort on the part of the political elite to convince a reluctant electorate. Most of the political parties used their organisation to support the proposed lowering of the voting age, and with a few exceptions newspapers were in favour. The supporters formed a campaign committee. The initiative for this committee was taken by the Danish Youth Council. It was headed by the prime minister and composed of a number of prominent politicians. During the campaign this committee was staffed by the Danish Youth Council, and it raised funds, coordinated local campaign activities, distributed pamphlets, posters, stickers, etc. None of the party organisations was engaged entirely in a campaign against lowering the voting age to 18 years, and the few politicians who spoke against the proposal did so as individuals. Actually, resentment against lowering the voting age was mostly expressed by private citizens in letters to the editors of certain newspapers. During the first half of September, all political parties were given time to present their views on the issue on both radio and television. These broadcasts were predominantly and almost tediously in favour of lowering the voting age to 18 years. None of them was entirely against lowering, and opponents were only permitted to speak in a few of them.

However, the public debate on the voting age issue was never very comprehensive and took a long time to take off during the summer months. When the campaign finally attracted the attention of the public, it was to a large extent overshadowed by negotiations about the possible broadening of the parliamentary

basis of the Social Democratic minority government and the dramatic formation of a government coalition by the Social Democrats and Liberals in the last part of August.

The reasons put forward in the debate, were well-known from previous discussions on the voting age in Denmark (Svensson 1978, 53–89). Supporters of lowering the voting age to 18 years first and foremost referred to the principle of adult universal suffrage and the fact that the age of majority had been lowered to 18 years in 1976. The identity between majority age and voting age was undoubtedly a strong argument among both the politicians and the voters. For instance, in January 1978 60 per cent of the respondents in a representative national sample agreed with this argument (Svensson 1978, 98). The supporters of the 18 years lower limit further pointed to the fact that the voting age had been lowered to 18 years in most of the other European countries during the past decade. A disagreement between supporters and opponents continued – in particular in letters to newspapers – about the political competence (most letters) and the political interest of young people and also about what the political consequences of lowering the voting age to 18 years would be: would there be a large swing to the left?⁴ Those politicians who were opposed to the proposal mainly argued that a further lowering of the voting age was premature. They feared that a new referendum on this issue would once again result in a rejection of the bill and that popular trust in representative democracy would be undermined in the process, since it would demonstrate an absence of agreement between the Folketing and the electorate. Late in the campaign a conservative member of the Folketing, Ib Stetter, emphasized that according to the bill the age qualification for eligibility to stand for parliament would also be reduced to 18 years in Denmark, whereas a number of other countries maintain a higher age qualification for such eligibility than for suffrage.

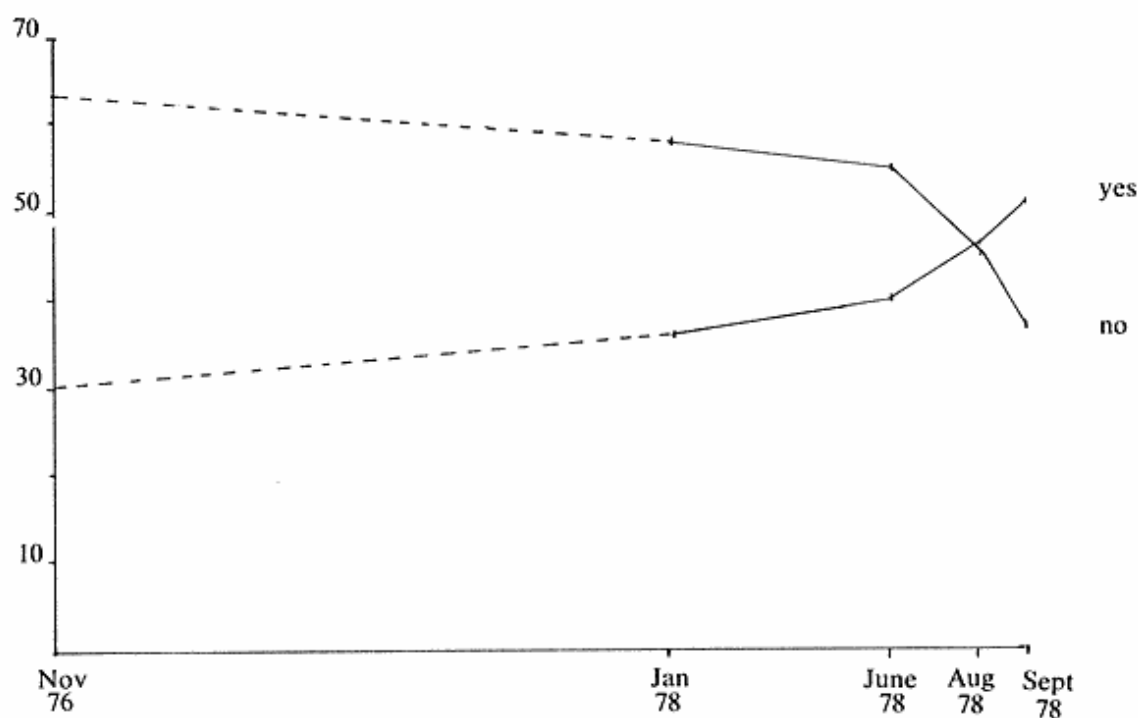


Figure 1. Trends in public opinion on the voting age of 18 years

Source: Gallup figures published in *Berlingske Tidende*, 17 September 1978.

	Nov. 76	Jan. 78	Jun. 78	Aug. 78	Sept. 78
	In percent				
Yes to 18 years	30	36	40	46	51
No to 18 years	63	58	55	45	37
Don't know	7	6	5	9	12
All	100	100	100	100	100

When the Radical Liberals in November 1976 proposed lowering the voting age to 18 years, this proposal was by no means a popular demand. The Gallup Institute found, when asking a national sample how they would cast their vote if there was to be a referendum the next day on this matter, that only 30 per cent would support a voting age of 18 years. As shown in Figure 1 there was hardly any change in public opinion during the next year, when the Folketing dealt with the bill. By the time the Folketing passed the bill in the early summer of 1978 there was still a clear majority against the proposed lowering of the voting age. The next three months, however, led to a total shift in public opinion. Information about the background for the proposal, discussion of the reasons presented for and against a lower voting age, and the deliberate campaign all had a market impact. It seemed, after all, as if the time was ripe for a popular approval of the bill.

3. *The Result of the Referendum*

The actual referendum passed the Folketing proposal to lower the voting age from 20 to 18 years – although by only a narrow margin. The turn-out was 63.7 per cent, at the same level as in 1969 (when it was 64.1 per cent).⁵ 1,216,275 votes were cast in favor and 1,042,377 against, i.e. 34.1 per cent of the eligible voters said yes and 29.3 per cent no to this age qualification. This meant that neither of the two requirements for a rejection of the bill were fulfilled: there was no majority against the bill, and the votes cast against it did not make up 30 per cent of the eligible voters. Yet less than 5 per cent of the eligible voters could have changed the decision.

The voting pattern throughout the country showed marked geographical and urban-rural variations. First, a center-periphery dimension was evident. Whereas the new voting age was rejected in Jylland, it was accepted both on the islands and in Copenhagen, in the capital area by almost twice as many yes-votes as no-votes (Elklit and Tonsgaard 1978, 36–40). The two requirements for a rejection of the bill were fulfilled in no less than 164 of the 275 municipalities in Denmark i.e. almost 60 per cent of the municipalities rejected the bill. Generally, the greater the distance from Copenhagen, the fewer the number of yes-votes (Bentzon, 1978, 30–31). Secondly, the municipalities with a majority of yes-votes were mainly among the most populous municipalities in the country. Generally, the more rural the municipality, the greater the number of votes against a lower voting age (Bentzon 1978, 30). It has been argued that the center-periphery dimension was more important

than the level of urbanization with respect to the voting age issue (Elklit and Tonsgaard 1978, 38).

The analysis of the referendum result has up to this point used hard data about voting behavior in municipalities and the country at large. In addition, it is possible to apply some soft data from the Gallup Institute in order to characterize the behavior of individual voters.⁶ Due to limits of space I shall deal here only with the voters' age, party preference, and political interest.

In the popular view the old are generally believed to be more conservative than the young, more disinclined to change the status quo. This general notion could in particular be expected to hold true when the question concerns the age qualification for political influence through the ballot.⁷ At any rate, in January 1978, before the Folketing passed the bill on lowering the voting age and before the public campaign, a clear correlation was evident between age and attitude towards lowering the voting age: the higher the age of the respondents, the smaller the number with a positive attitude towards a voting age of 18 years, and correspondingly the greater the number with a negative attitude (Svensson 1978, 93-95).

The actual voting behavior in the referendum confirmed this relationship between age and the attitude towards the voting age issue. The figures in Table 1 clearly demonstrate that young voters to a higher extent than the old ones cast their vote in favor of 18 years. A tendency towards a tripartite division is noticeable. The two age groups below 30 show an absolute majority in favor; the age groups between 30 and 50 show a clear, but not an absolute, majority; and the age groups above 50 show a small majority.⁸ Whereas in January a majority for 18 years as the voting age showed up in the age groups below 40 and a majority against in the age groups above 40, in the referendum all age groups voted in favor. It seems as if the campaign in particular had an impact among older voters. Another explanation of the referendum result at this point could be that the opponents turned out in the referendum to a lesser degree than supporters. Such behavior would be quite natural on the part of opponents considering both the low saliency of the issue and the cross-pressure between their own disposition and the one-sided campaign in the mass media in favor of reducing the voting age.

Historically, the position taken by the political parties on the voting age issue has followed the basic left-right dimension in Danish politics rather closely. This has been the case both at the level of the Folketing and at the level of the voters (Svensson 1978, 38-40, 45-45). Even if a number of new parties have arisen in the 1970s, one might expect a left-right pattern to exist in voting behavior.

Table 1. Voting behavior and age. Percentages.

	Yes to 18 years	No to 18 years	Did not vote	N.a.	Total	
20-24	51	15	32	2	100	(N = 156)
25-29	54	24	21	1	100	(N = 163)
30-39	45	28	24	4	100	(N = 290)
40-49	36	31	29	5	100	(N = 236)
50-59	37	36	21	5	100	(N = 224)
60-69	39	37	21	3	100	(N = 212)
70-	32	29	32	7	100	(N = 179)

Table 2. Voting behavior and party preference. Percentages.

	Yes to 18 years	No to 18 years	Did not vote	N.a.	Total	
Socialist People's Party	81	8	10	–	100	(N = 62)
Communists	74	4	21	–	100	(N = 35)
Left Socialists	71	–	29	–	100	(N = 31)
Justice Party	54	17	28	–	100	(N = 35)
Radical Liberals	53	20	20	7	100	(N = 37)
Social Democrats	51	24	23	2	100	(N = 463)
Liberals	25	46	25	4	100	(N = 161)
Conservatives	24	61	13	1	100	(N = 89)
Progress Party	21	51	25	3	100	(N = 122)
Center Democrats	19	49	32	–	100	(N = 13)
Christian People's Party	18	33	49	–	100	(N = 20)

Party preference was identified by the question: 'Which party would you vote for, if there was to be a Folketing election tomorrow?'

The figures in Table 2, where the political parties have been ranked by decreasing percentages of yes to 18 years as voting age, confirm the existence of such a pattern. Three separate groups are easily identified. To the left the voters of the three socialist parties overwhelmingly voted for 18 years. In the center a majority of the voters of the Justice Party, the Social Democratic Party and the Radical Liberal Party cast their votes in favor of the lower voting age. The last group is neatly composed of the bourgeois parties whose voters rejected the bill in the referendum. Within each group the mutual ranking is, perhaps, a little surprising. It should be remembered, however, that this ranking is made on the basis of small differences in the percentage of yes-votes, and that these percentages are computed in several cases on a small number of respondents. On the other hand, using the percentages of no-votes as the basis would change nothing in the overall structure of a left, center, and right group, though some people would no doubt be more satisfied with the resulting re-ranking of the parties on the left and the right wing.⁹

Several things indicate that the voting age issue had a low saliency among the electorate. The decision would have no direct effect upon the daily life of most voters; the issue was not tied up with important socio-economic questions; and a great many voters no doubt perceived this issue as remote, legal, and without great importance. If this is true, it could be expected that many voters would make up their mind on the basis of poor information, prejudices etc. In addition, it could be expected, that many voters would not take the trouble to participate in the referendum. On the other hand, one could imagine that the voters who generally take an interest in politics would be better informed, and that they would perceive this issue to be of some importance, because it was linked with the general question of representative democracy, the political influence of a group of young people, etc. It could also be expected that voters with an interest in politics would be more sympathetic towards lowering the voting age, being more aware of the background and the possible consequences of such a lowering. Finally, it could be expected that the more interested voters would be more likely to participate in the referendum.

Table 3. Voting behavior and political interest. Percentages.

	Yes to 18 years	No to 18 years	Did not vote	N.a.	Total	
Very much interested in politics	55	25	18	2	100	(N = 244)
Somewhat interested in politics	46	29	22	4	100	(N = 630)
Only a little interested in politics	29	28	40	3	100	(N = 566)
Not at all interested in politics	17	14	63	6	100	(N = 149)

The respondents' political interest was identified by the question: 'Would you say that you yourself are very much interested in politics, somewhat, only a little or not at all interested in politics?'

The figures in Table 3 generally confirm these expectations. The higher the political interest of the voters, the stronger the tendency to vote in favor of the proposal, and the higher their turn-out in the referendum. At the same time, it should be observed that there is a majority for lowering the voting age at all levels of political interest, and that the no-percentage is almost the same at all levels of political interest except the lowest. This observation supports the supposition made above that many opponents of the bill did not take part in the referendum. A higher turn-out might very well have resulted in a rejection of the proposal to lower the voting age to 18 years.

NOTES

- 1 In Norway universal manhood suffrage was introduced in 1898 with a voting age of 25 years. The suffrage was extended to women in 1913. The voting age was lowered to 23 years in 1919, to 21 years in 1946, and to 20 years in 1967. Recently, only a short time after the Danish referendum, the Storting lowered the voting age to 18 years. In Sweden universal suffrage for men aged over 24 was introduced in 1907. In 1921 it was extended to women, and at the same time the voting age was lowered to 23 years. The voting age was further lowered to 21 years in 1945, to 20 years in 1970, and finally to 18 years in 1975.
- 2 On the other hand, the voting age to the upper house in Denmark, the Landsting, was raised to 35 years!
- 3 For further information on the 1969 referendum, see Nielsen 1969, and Riis 1969.
- 4 The main reasons stated for lowering the voting age to 18 years can be found in the three first readings of the bill: *Folketingstidende*, 1976-77 (1. samling), col. 1645-1662; 1976-77 (2. samling), col. 2988-3304; and 1977-78, col. 2533-2540. See also Svensson, 1978, 52-89.
- 5 These and the following figures refer to Denmark proper, that is excluding Greenland and the Faroe Islands.
- 6 Due to a grant from The Danish Social Science Research Council, the author was able to have a number of questions on the voting age issue included in Gallup omnibus no. 18, the first one after the referendum.

- 7 The relationship between age and conservative attitudes is, of course, much more complicated than that stated here. In principle, the effects of 'aging' and the effects of membership of a 'political generation' should be separated. This is, however, impossible with the data at hand.
- 8 The same tripartite division was found in the so-called Odderanalysis, Elklit and Tonsgaard 1978, 51–52. This analysis was sponsored by the TV-news (TV-Avisen, Danmarks Radio) and conducted by researchers from the Institute of Political Science, University of Aarhus, and Regnecentralen. 3,261 respondents were asked a number of questions just after leaving the official polling-booth. A similar analysis was carried out in connection with the referendum in 1969, see Riis 1969.
- 9 For a further discussion of the relationship between party preference and voting behavior in the referendum, see Elklit and Tonsgaard 1978, 52–53, 56–59.

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